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Planning Practice Feature

Planning Website: The Farmers Branch Experience

by Kaizer Rangwala, AICP

In an effort to part a veritable sea of paper and reduce staff time spent knuckle-deep in toner, the City of Farmers Branch, Texas, planning division is using cyberspace as a win-win arena for satisfying customer needs while enhancing internal abilities to get the job done.

The four planners in the Farmers Branch planning division manage the city's current and long-range planning and a variety of development related information.

In the past, planners spent a third of their time responding to inquiries for plans, ordinances, maps, and demographics. Planners increasingly found themselves wrestling with the fax machine and cumbersome e-mail attachments in an effort to get huge documents from one place to another. There had to be a better way to serve Farmers Branch, a suburb with 27,000 residents and a daytime population three times that number, nestled in the demographic center of the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. The planning division has had a web presence for a number of years. The information on the website, however, was limited to a brief description of responsibilities and contact information.

In 2002, the city became interested in a new and improved website and was investing in web design training. "We saw the planning website as a huge, untapped opportunity to provide the entire scope of information our customers needed," said Becky Baggett, AICP, Associate Planner and planning division web designer. A new planning division website was created within the city's prescribed framework of design and navigation guidelines. "Virtually everybody in the planning division was involved in design and fine-tuning the website," Baggett said.

The initial web pages were modest and designed with a long-term plan for more layers of information to be added to these pages without having to change the basic framework. Ease of website navigation was addressed on multiple levels, from limiting the number of clicks to the ever-present sidebar links. Graphics and thumbnails were added as quick tools linking to content. The theory was that consistent style makes for a recognizable and clear identity that makes customers feel comfortable as they negotiate a website that features

information to a dynamic focal point for the community to utilize time and time again as a constantly evolving source of planning services and information," said Tom Bryson, the city's communications director.

Planners are continually adding new features and services that add value to the website. Live streaming of city council meetings allows viewers to stay current on planning and zoning decisions in the comfort of their homes. Listserv and e-mail notification gives users the option to receive planning information and news via e-mail. Interactive mapping offers customers access to parcel information, zoning, comprehensive plans, infrastructure, and aerials. Annual reports, monthly newsletters, presentations from the planning division's lecture series, and relevant news articles are periodically posted online. A secure website for planning and zoning commissioners allows them to view meeting agendas and staff reports online, reducing printing and delivery costs.

The website has significantly reduced operating costs, as posting planning documents online means fewer printed copies. In past years, the city earmarked roughly \$25,000 to \$50,000 to produce and distribute several hundred copies of planning documents. Now that planning documents are posted online — and available to the public at no cost— a limited few hard copies are printed at a fraction of the cost.

Posting frequently requested information online has allowed planners more time to focus on overdue updates to the comprehensive plan and development codes. The website also has proved to be an effective tool for conducting surveys and receiving feedback on draft planning documents.

The website has created lots of efficiencies for the planning division. It has reduced the number of phone calls and questions, while having a profound impact on people's understanding of planning principles through the various planning-related information posted online.

The website has helped dissolve the frequently perceived bureaucratic veil of secrecy and control of development-related information and encouraged the free flow of information. If information is power, then Farmers Branch customers share in that power via the website. The website has become a channel to enhance relationships with customers. As such, it has become the keystone of the division's multifaceted customer service strategy.

For additional information on Farmers Branch website visit www.farmersbranch.info/planning or call Becky Baggett, AICP, at 972-919-2669.

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consistent elements. Consistency and good design are prerequisites of a user-friendly website.

The new planning website allows planners to deliver seamless service by being available to customers anytime, anywhere, and anyhow: by phone, fax, e-mail, and now Internet . Vast amounts of information have been compiled and created in the planning process. Agendas, maps, ordinances, census compilations, and comprehensive plans have been turned out and are accessible to the public on the site. A planning glossary, related web links, and demographic pages provide background information. Development review is aided by ordinances, a zoning atlas, guidebook, online application forms, and meeting agendas.

Staff time and resources are more effective when responses to inquiries involve immediate website access to planning information. Customers benefit from a better understanding of planning processes and information in their discussions with staff.

Web Site Features

The planning division homepage features a "What's New" section that provides easy access to latest and most-used information. The remaining information on the website is organized around the three broad services provided by the planning division:

1. Current Planning

Easy access is provided to application forms, hearing dates, a developer guidebook, agendas and packets, interactive zoning atlas, parcel and infrastructure information, and aerial photographs. Development case studies highlight positive principles and techniques from past development and serve as a valuable resource to inspire developers to build better projects.

Ordinances can be accessed geographically by clicking on an interactive zoning map or by selecting the respective ordinance number.

2. Long-range Planning

Comprehensive and other districtwide planning documents are available online. A new feature, "For Youth," encourages younger residents to learn more about planning and development.

3. Information

Information on staff, planning and zoning commissioners, lecture series, pertinent links, glossary of frequently used planning terms, newsletters, and awards can be accessed online.

"The Farmers Branch planning division transformed its website from a static billboard of